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SUBJECT: THE ONCE AND FUTURE PRESIDENT? MULUZI DECLARES
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY

11. (SBU) Summary: Former President Bakili Muluzi, renowned for his government's corruption while in office, has announced that he will run for President again in 2009. Muluzi, famously coy regarding his political intentions, said at a mass rally in Blantyre on March 11 that he was ready to run "if the (United Democratic Front party) convention will elect me." Meanwhile, a number of traditional chiefs, along with a new political pressure group called Coalition Against Muluzi, have come out against Muluzi's candidacy. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Muluzi, speaking at his second public rally in as many weeks, told supporters that he is ready to face former protigi and current President Bingu Wa Mutharika, pledging, "he cannot compete against me." Muluzi also called on his party's MPs to push for local government elections, demanding that they be held this June. All other potential UDF presidential candidates, including a number of current MPs, have dropped out of the race for the UDF nomination and declared their support for Muluzi, making his "selection" by the party convention a foregone conclusion.

13. (SBU) At a competing rally held by President Mutharika in northern Malawi, Paramount Chief M'mbelwa IV called on Muluzi to drop out of the race. M'mbelwa, one of the most senior chiefs in Malawi, said Muluzi had "left this country with huge debts which Mutharika has worked very hard to clear off." Other traditional authorities, including chiefs from northern and southern Malawi, have also coe ouu publicly against Muluzi's return to active politics.

14. (SBU) A group of prominent journalists has also created an organization called the Coalition Against Muluzi, in an attempt to discourage people from supporting the former President's re-election bid. The group, led by journalists Gideon Munthanh and Chinyeke Tembo, says it will have "massive countrywide civic education campaigns...to educate people in the country that what the former president wants to do is wrong." The UDF has questioned the group's motivation and accused it of being a front for President Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party.

15. (SBU) There is also debate over the legality of Mulzui, already having served two terms as president from 1994-2004, running for office again. The Malawian constitution limits any president to "a maximum of two

consecutive terms." Muluzi, who failed in a 2003 bid to amend the constitution to allow him to serve a third term, and his supporters say this means Muluzi can serve a third, non-consecutive term. While most observers agree with this interpretation, some claim that Muluzi has already served his "maximum" of two consecutive terms, and is thus ineligible to serve another. If Mutharika challenges this, it would be referred to the Constitutional Court, and then possibly the Supreme Court, for an interpretation. Similar referrals have taken over a year to reach their conclusion, which could push the debate well into 2008 or even 2009.

16. (SBU) Comment: Contrary to what one might expect, many believe that Muluzi has a decent chance of winning back the Presidency. Despite his administration's horrible economic management and wanton corruption, Muluzi still enjoys a good deal of popularity among the rural masses. An experienced orator and smooth politician, Muluzi is well known for giving out envelopes of cash to groups of supporters. Muluzi is expected to capture a good amount of support in Malawi's populous southern region, as well as in the Muslim areas along the lakeshore. However, the big winner of Muluzi's candidacy could be Malawi Congress Party leader John Tembo, also a presumptive candidate for 2009. President Mutharika should get the bulk of the votes from sparsely populated northern Malawi, and then could split the South with Muluzi. This could leave Tembo, if he maintains his party's traditional firm grip on Malawi's central region, as the election winner with a plurality of votes. However, with a long way between now and 2009, a number of things could change. New entries into the race, an ongoing corruption case against Muluzi, the selection of running mates, and whatever may happen in the remainder of Mutharika's first term could all have a major impact on the next election. End Comment.

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